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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: FORMER PM LAAR OPTIMISTIC ON GEORGIA

Classified By: CDA Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) On January 23, former Prime Minister Mart Laar told Charge that he was "optimistic" about the situation in Georgia - citing improvements in Georgia's energy security and factors affecting the situation in Abkhazia. Laar noted the GOG asked him to come back to Georgia in late February (in the week prior to Estonia's Parliamentary elections in which Laar is running), and he plans to go.

¶2. (C) With respect to gas supply, Laar said, Georgia is in a much better position this year than expected, despite complications with Azerbaijani supplies. The combination of an improved budgetary situation and the warm winter has helped the Georgians. Starting next year, Georgia will be independent of Russian gas, Laar added.

¶3. (C) On Abkhazia, Laar emphasized the importance of getting international peacekeepers noting there needs to be more than just Russians on the ground. He maintains contact with representatives of Abkhazia and noted he believes the independence movement in this region is "serious," which makes it possible to negotiate with them. (Note: Laar contrasted Abkhazia to South Ossetia, which, he claimed, was under what was tantamount to Russian military occupation, with all of the South Ossetians involved in the independence fight in the early '90s having gone over to President Saakashvili.) Laar noted that the Russians are making things difficult for the Abkhaz. The Russians have demanded that the Abkhaz refuse to negotiate with the Georgians, for example, and - during the Georgian operation in the Kodori Gorge last year - the Russians demanded the Abkhaz respond with violence to provoke the Georgians. The Abkhaz refused, however, arguing that they, not the Russians, would be the ones to take casualties if it came down to fighting. Laar said he believes Russian pressure has convinced the Abkhaz that true independence is not possible. For their part, the Georgians have indicated they are willing to give the Abkhaz "everything they want" except formal independence.

¶4. (C) In contrast, Laar said he has visited Ajaria about every two months, has never met anyone who was really interested in autonomy, and he finds this area to be the most quickly developing part of Georgia. According to Laar, the Ajarians are extremely satisfied with the economic development in the region, and public opinion is very positive towards Saakashvili.

¶5. (C) Finally, with respect to Russian comments that Kosovo should serve as an example for resolution of other "frozen conflicts," Laar said he believes there is a policy debate within Russian foreign policy elites on the subject. Many of these elites fear that, if the GOR cites Kosovo as a model, it sets a precedent for potential secessionists in parts of Russia such as Chechnya.

